

ARNOLD ARBORETUM HARVARD UNIVERSITY



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THE CHINESE COLLECTION

ONE of the most striking portions of the Arnold Arboretum during May and early June is the varied collection of shrubs and trees planted on a rounded knoll just southeast of the summit of Bussey Hill. Gently curving grass paths encircle the crown of this knoll, with branches leading off down the slopes in different directions.

Two of these paths lead off from Bussey Hill Road opposite the banked plantation of forsythia which has produced such a wealth of color this spring. At the points from which they take off the paths are margined with tall vacciniums, barberries and calicarpas. One goes only a short distance before he is confronted with a splash of brilliant yellow in the plantings of cytiscus and genista which lie between the paths. To the right is the nearly pure white *Rhododendron Schlippenbachii* which has the largest flowers of any of the azaleas in the collection. From here on there is a profusion of color and form. A mound of lilac-purple blossoms nearly conceals a massed planting of the Korean azalea (*Rhododendron yedoense* var. *poukhanense*). Under the old pines are the early-flowering *Rhododendron mucronulatum*, various forms of *Enkianthus* with their delicate pendulous blossoms, and the brilliant *Rhododendron obtusum* var. *Kaempferi*. Farther down the slope to the southward are beds of the hybrid azaleas in whose flowers a variety of salmon-pink tints play havoc with our usual concepts of color in this group. The dove-tree (*Davidia involucrata*) is represented in several places along the upper paths. It was killed back to the ground during the recent hard winters, but now shows vigorous sprouts six to eight feet high. *Fothergilla*, *Leucothoë*, *Stewartia*, and many forms of *Cotoneaster* are arranged in the beds above the pines, as well as the exotic maples (*Acer Tschonoskii*, *A. griseum*) and *Euptelea*.

In large beds around the crown of the hill, inside the paths, are barberries, honeysuckles, cotoneasters, hydrangeas, *Kerria* and *Acan-*

thopanax. Near the point where the largest of the paths returns to Bussey Hill Road is a large plant of *Exochorda*, the pearl bush. The top of the knoll itself has an open plantation of flowering cherries, crab apples, barberries, and honeysuckles.

On the south side of the knoll, rising from the midst of an extensive planting of azaleas, are some ancient white oaks. They are much the largest and oldest trees in the Arboretum. In 1931 the lightning killed one of these veterans and it was immediately cut down, showing a trunk which had resisted disease so successfully that it was solid to the center. It proved to be about 265 years old, so that its life span covered most of the period since the first hardy settlers took up land in the Town of Roxbury. It was a young spindling shoot in the 1670's and during the first 90 years of its life it attained a diameter of only 6 inches. This can indicate that it grew until about 1750 or '60 in a rather dense woodland of trees so large that they kept it in shade. At about this stage in its life, however, the surrounding remnant of the primeval forest in which it stood was nearly all cut down. The result was that, relieved of competition with its older neighbors and exposed to full sunlight, it acquired a new lease on life. From that time on it grew rapidly, putting on thick rings of wood each year.

It is intriguing to reconstruct the scenes which have passed upon this knoll during the lifetime of the old oaks. Several generations of the children of the Weld families that lived on the property must have played among the great columnar trunks of that small patch of primeval woods which persisted for at least half a century in the otherwise cleared pastures and orchards of the district. Hepaticas, columbines and asters must have made a garden of the shaded aisles. In Revolutionary times when firewood was scarce in Roxbury, the stunted remnants of the old wood were too small or too inaccessible to be attractive. Or perhaps they were purposely preserved by some Weld descendant to keep alive childhood memories.

In the first decade of the 19th century Mr. Benjamin Bussey, a well-to-do Boston merchant, realized the beauty of the site and purchased the farm containing it for a country home to which he could retire in his declining years. He built his mansion on the easterly side of what we now call Bussey Hill, and a summerhouse at the top of the slope. A double row of white pines was planted in rectangular arrangement around the crown of the hill, and long rows of lilac bushes margined the paths which led up to the summerhouse. Several of the pines are still standing: and though somewhat broken in appearance and bent to the eastward by the winds, they contribute much to the beauty of the modern plantations. The rows of lilacs, large parts of which also remain after at least 125 years, have grown together so that the old paths are scarcely visible. To the westward were views of pasture and orchard, in fields separated by the characteristic stone



PLATE VI

Part of the Chinese Collection on the top of Bussey Hill
in the Arnold Arboretum

walls which lend charm and order to so much of the New England landscape. Northeastward were Jamaica Plain and Roxbury, and on clear days the Bay was visible. Southeastward one could look across the valley of Stony Brook to Milton and the Blue Hills. From the time of the changes wrought by Mr. Bussey the top of the hill has remained a garden spot. At his death about the middle of the last century, he left it to Harvard College as part of a foundation for a school of agriculture and horticulture. Subsequently Frederick Law Olmstead, pioneer in American landscape architecture, planning the Arnold Arboretum with Professor Sargent, clearly recognized its attractiveness and potentialities. Bussey Hill Road, made to encircle the hill and end in a broad plaza on the summit, gave easy access to the whole area and ensured its significance as a focal point in future developments.

The plantings as we know them now did not take form until about 25 years ago when the collection of the late E. H. Wilson began to appear at the Arboretum. Our rounded knoll was selected as a suitable place for a special exhibit of floral wonders introduced by this gifted gentleman, and the whole area became known as "the Chinese collection." An old photograph in the library of the Arboretum shows that early in the 1900's the knoll was a grassy meadow from which hay was cut in summer. Its soil is gravelly and poor, and the long struggle to make it suitable for planting can only be visualized from Professor Sargent's cryptic records in his annual reports and from the recollections of men still at the Arboretum. At one time, for instance, masses of peat cut from the low ground of the South Street tract were strewn over the beds to increase their fertility.

The old oaks have seen the whole gamut of change. They served as part of the background for the long years of toil and struggle endured by the colonial farmers who built their successful communities in the New World. Forces which began to be felt through the ambition and imagination of Mr. Bussey finally brought the land into contact with a great educational enterprise so that it contributed its small part to the vast influence upon American applied biology which the Bussey Institution exerted. But the later scenes are the strangest. Here are exotic plants brought from the other side of the world to be tested for beauty and adaptability before they can be used to grace American gardens: azaleas with giant, pure white flowers entirely unknown in America; other azaleas with almost every conceivable combination of red, orange, white and purple; the curious dove-tree with flowers like great white wings; and impossible maples with copper-colored bark that peels off in thin sheets like that of the sycamore. Such wonders were certainly beyond the wildest dreams of those children of the Welds' who played here. The only continuity is in the inherent charm of the place and in the lives of the ancient oaks.

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